

Some Poems of Lawrence Durrell in Relation to Japanese Poetry

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Lawrence Durrell (1912-1990) was born at Darjiling, India, at the foot of the Himalaya mountains. He was English-Irish, and remained there during his boyhood. Durrell seems to have been destined to be an exile by nature.

He never became familiar with his mother country, England. He went to the mediterranean area early in his youth, stayed at Alexandria, Egypt, during World War II, and returned to Greece. That Westerners, leaving Western Europe, proceed to countries of different cultures may be taken to signify the death and rebirth of their soul.

One of the magnificent modern monuments of literature, *The Alexandria Quartets* (1957-1960), needed over ten years to write, while Durrell as an Englishman had to escape from that city of death which buried his ego. But was it possible for him to return completely to the Western World? After fourteen years, *The Revolt of Aphrodite* (1974) was written, the theme being the fall of the Western World. His last major work, *The Avignon Quintets*, is the meta-fiction in which Oriental mystery is mingled into the core of the return to the 'death' of Europe.

A serious problems for the modern wanderer is a conflict between self-consciousness developed suddenly and interference from society. In order to establish one's individual identity, some revolt against the world, and others escape abroad. Even a happy traveler like Wordsworth is a sad vagabond holding an incurable germ of disease, the ego. Most of them have an unhappy soul and must wander pointlessly, each tossed about and entangled with his own absurd agony and desire.

The Japanese *haikai* poet, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), for instance, attempts to abandon his own adherence to 'self' and entrust himself to 'floating clouds and running water', that is, to nature. Such an Oriental

mentality of 'throwing oneself down' seems quite different from the European persistence in self-consciousness. Durrell's unsophisticated acceptance of nature, however, seems near to Oriental philosophy toward the world.

Meanwhile an excessive assertion of 'self' might produce the tragedy of the murder of flesh and blood. The figure of King Lear, who was betrayed by his daughters, deserting his peaceful castle, and forced to wander in the wilderness, is a perfect metaphor for the unhappy state of the modern 'self'.

For Durrell in his youth, the blessed scenery of the blue sea with green islands and his loved ones saved him and healed his wounds from his conflict between his inner self and outer oppression.

The poetic world of Lawrence Durrell is as fruitful as that of his novels. I myself have been so attracted by his poems that I wish to search for the reason. I find something in common between the poems of Lawrence Durrell and Japanese poetry which is one manifestation of Orientalism. Many of Durrell's poems manifest the voice of his soul which appeals to the Japanese mind and it attracts me as well without any reason or logic.

I participated and had good experiences in the conferences of International Lawrence Durrell Society in Alexandria and in Corfu. Therefore I will begin with two poems which have the names of those places as titles. In addition, I will comment on "Deus Loci" composed at another point of a triangle which encompasses the Mediterranean Sea — a small village in Italy.

"Corfu: Greece" is Part VIII of *Cities, Plains, People*. Though it was set with many metaphors, the leading part here is played by 'landscape', and at the same time 'a family' enjoying their life in it.

So time, the lovely and mysterious
With promises and blessings moves
Through her swift degrees, (Durrell: *Collected Poems*, p.165)

'Time' is beautiful and mysterious here, too, full of promises and blessings. It is universal and its progress is very swift. However, the poet gladly introduces his wife into the rocky island and the cypress-trees.

Here worlds were confirmed in him.
Differences that matched like cloth
Between the darkness and the inner light
Moved on the undivided breath of blue. (CP. 165-66)

This passage in the fifth stanza expresses the poetic fulfilment achieved in the poet's mind. The darkness and the inner light are no longer different, moving in the breezes on the blue sea. Worlds — the Indian Civilization which commands a view of the Himalayas, the Anglo-European Society and this Mediterranean circle — form a firm substance in him.

In the former half of the first stanza of "Alexandria", Durrell writes:

To the lucky who have lovers or friends,
Who move to their sweet undiscovered ends,
Or whom the great conspiracy deceives,
I wish these whirling autumn leaves: (CP.154)

Reading this passage, we can believe Durrell is one of those who are lucky, having lovers and friends, moving to their unfound purposes and not recognizing the deceits (political or metaphysical). In this foreign country, the poet sends sympathy and affection, along with the lyricism of autumn leaves, to his friends and all like them. Here the light of the cold Pharos (the lighthouse in Alexandria) lends mystery to this contemporary confused city and urges the poet's love for vagabondage.

"Deus Loci" was written in the small village of Ischia in Italy. In the tour to the volcanic island of Ischia full of scenic beauty, Durrell might also quench his maniac zeal for islands.

All our religions founder, you
remain, small sunburnt deus loci
safe in your natal shrine, (CP.214)

Even if all the modern religions were lost, a small sun-burnt earthen dummy might remain as 'the land's God'. The poet, who met this spirit of place long since divined and waited for, achieved ultimate peace in this passionate spring of the deep south of Europe.

In these three poems, composed at the three points of a triangle around the Mediterranean Sea, I cannot help noticing the poet's enthusiastic devotion to this area and the features common to the poems — that is, his conviction that poetry is his mission, and his love for others.

We can also see in these poems the growing expansion of objects of the poet's love: love for his family in 'Corfu', love for his friends and others in "Alexandria", and for all creatures, even for the earth and nature, symbolized by a small earthen figure in a rural district of Europe. The last stage may be called 'Romantic Pantheism'.

Durrell considers while bound for Cyprus: 'Journeys, like artists, are born and not made. A thousand differing circumstances contribute to them, few of them willed or determined by the will' (*Bitter Lemons*, p.15). He emphasizes the spontaneity of the human demand for travel. And he continues to argue:

They [journeys] flower spontaneously out of the demands of our natures — and the best of them lead us not only outwards in space, but inward as well. Travel can be one of the most rewarding forms of introspection....

This is indeed what Durrell pursues with the themes of 'journeys'.

One of the most important elements of Durrell's poetry together with 'journeys' is, I think, 'landscape'. Durrell may have enjoyed moving to many places in the world from the time of his early childhood. Though sometimes compelled by his work or the Second World War, he could concentrate his mind on the new scenery and communication with the

natives. He is considered to be the innate exile. Jennifer Birkett mentioned universality of the landscape in Durrell's poetry, writing:

The landscape invites the human self to physical and spiritual dissolution into its own greater totality, a mystical identification with the universe that abolishes all distinctions, including that of life and death. (DLB 20, p. 89)

In the landscape, time is both transient and eternal; rendering 'a sort of immediacy of impact' (*Key to Modern Poetry*) to its duration.

The climate around the Mediterranean is mild, the wind and water quiet. Words like 'Spring', 'dullness' and 'idleness' express the poet's feeling of simple delight. Satisfactory sleep creeps in:

Sleep. Napkins folded after grace. ("Corfu: Greece", CP.166)

However, a sense of evanescence always hangs on him, too. In some similes — 'lovers, like swimmers lost at sea' ("Corfu", CP.166), and '...the last pale/lighthouse, like a Samson blinded,...' ("Alexandria", CP.166) — pessimism peers through. In "Alexandria" the poet moves toward horizons of love or good luck, but it is 'Through many negatives to what I am'. In "Lesbos" the poet sleeps, but 'the dispiriting autumn moon/ ... /Needs company and is brooding on the dead,' (CP.226). The poet, too, is brooding on the dead and becomes the company of the moon.

In the meantime, many vagabond poets in Japan also have the will to break with success in life, weaving human sorrow and delight into their art. A sense of evanescence as well as exile is a distinctive characteristic of Japanese poetry.

Traditional Japanese poetry is of two kinds: the tanka (the modern name of the *waka*) and the haiku (the modern name of the *haikai*). The tanka is constructed of five lines which have 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 syllables. The haiku has only three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively. Both should have one word revealing the season in which the poem was

composed. Within this limited compass poets must and can express a great variety of feelings and thoughts, catching a glimpse of eternity through the evanescent and the commonplace.

Of the ancient masters, I will introduce you Saigyō, Bashō, and Issa, and, as a representative modern *tanka* poet, Wakayama Bokusui, and finally, as one of the superb modern poets, Maruyama Kaoru.

Saigyō (1118-90) was at first a warrior who served close to the emperor. But he hated war and human mortality, and became a Buddhist priest. He wandered in the fields and mountains, appreciating especially the cherry blossoms and the moon, and died as a respected *tanka* poet.

I wish
I could die
under the cherry blossoms
with the full moon above
in early Spring.

is his most popular *waka* loved by almost all Japanese.

Matsuo Bashō (1644-94) was born as a son of a farmer. When he was young he aimed at being a poet and dedicated himself to the *haikai*.

I will leave on a journey
to be a skeleton in the wilderness
But how cold the wind feels.

The poet left his home, only for his literature's sake, resolved to be a skeleton in the wilderness. His stern attitude towards poetry is charged with the late autumn wind.

My dream runs about
in a dreary field though I lie
on my death-bed on a journey.

This was composed only four days before his death. On his death-bed he

must have had a great deal to leave with regret, thinking of the distance to artistic perfection.

In Durrell's poems deep affection for the infant is sometimes shown. One instance is the description of an innocent action on the part of his only daughter in 'Corfu'. His tender affection is turned even to an earthen figure whose laughter has 'accents of the little cackling god, part animal, part insect, and part bird' (*CP*.214, "Deus Loci"). Durrell's love is directed to all things in nature, and is full of humour.

There was a poet in Japan, too, who spread the intimate warmth of love around him. He is Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827).

Get out, get out of the way
where a horse will pass,
a tottering sparrow!

Issa is anxious for a little creature to be tread on by a big strong violence. He left some examples of moving haikai, among which I will cite here two written at the death of his beloved wife and a little daughter.

I know
the world of dew
is transient; but alas!

Why, why
did the wild pink snap?
I regret....

The wild pink flower is his daughter. Issa's affectionate emotion is a point in common with Durrell. When Durrell laboured with his knife to cut a 'Byron' under Sunium's white cliffs, he was 'thinking softly' of his late daughter, Allegra (*CP*.122, "Byron"). Poets' mortification at the frailty of life cannot be healed, however hard they intend to believe and fix the ultimate harmony of the universe in their art.

Wakayama Bokusui (1885-1928), a very popular tanka poet of modern Japan loved travel, too. His poetic style is fluent, lucid and romantic.

I am also going on a journey today
aiming for the land of no sorrow
crossing
how many mountains and rivers,
I wonder.

This expresses his endless search for truth and a sublime philosophy of life.

Isn't the floating white swan
very plaintive,
as he alone is white
not being dyed blue
between the sky and the sea?

In this we can see the attitude of the independent poet who lived in solitude and sorrow, detached from others. There is the same sense of proud loneliness in Durrell's poems, which we feel in "Happy Vagabond" (*CP*. 18) or "Sonnet Astray" (*CP*.19).

I was a vagabond; sunset and moon
Found me a place in their hearts.

...

So there was silence in the wind that followed after,
Dim with a memory I'd left behind
Chilled into terror by the phantom of your laughter.

("Happy Vagabond", *CP*.18)

And I,
Bewilderingly wonder at my great foolishness

To leave you forever alone that night by a star swept sea,
With the laughter of the dark surf in your eyes ...
Godless, and yet so very much a God.

(“Sonnet Astray”, *CP*.19)

Finally, I will introduce you the modern Japanese poet Maruyama Kaoru (1899-1974), who is approximately contemporary with Durrell. His idiosyncrasy, too, is a sense of exile and ardent yearning for the sea. His poem “A Sail, a Lamp and a Gull” shows his penchant for speculation and introspection and for observation in the form of a series of poems. In ‘A Sail Sang’, the sail sings he will blow the lamp out and wait for the gull to perch on it, in order to grasp the existence of the invisible gull. In ‘A Lamp Sang’, the lamp knows its poor light only lightens its blind face. However, there is one who is gazing at the lamp from darkness. It is the gull. In ‘A Gull Sang’, the gull speaks:

My figure can't be seen even by myself,
Still less by the lamp or the sail which reflects its light.
However, I can see the lamp and the sail clearly.
I but go round in the dark, frozen, distant.

The gull can see things, but in his bearings there is the severity of desperate solitude. The muttering of a gull who gazes lonely at the lamp and the sail is also the muttering of the even more forlorn poet who loves the sea.

The most similar feeling in Durrell's poems to this series of poems of Maruyama can be found in “Exile in Athens” (*CP*.112). In this poem, the poet aims to ‘share a boundary with eagles’ and to ‘be a subject of sails’ in order to ‘be a king of islands’.

Here alone in a stone city
I sing the rock, the sea-squill,
Over Greece the one punctual star.

...

To be a king of islands,
Share a bed with a star,
Be a subject of sails.

(CP.112, "Exile in Athens")

Now Athens is the lively capital of Greece, keeping a large population of almost 4,000,000. In spite of this, or because of it, severity of loneliness fills this poem. In Durrell's poetic world there are no villains, nor inflated men; there are only burdened, suffering victims. An exile in the thickly populated city must remember 'the tried intent,/Pale hands before the face:' He also reminds himself of the existence of 'the sea's blue negative', and 'Earth's dark metaphors'. Not to be king of the people, to rule the stone city and be king of time, the poet must persevere through his painful life with the ultimate stoicism. Even birds, even ants betray him. He endures this solitude and makes friends with a star shining aloofly. He is just 'a subject of sails.'

The two poets, Durrell and Maruyama, seem to me to express the severity of isolation together with bitter and sober self-realization.

Donald Keene comments on the brevity of traditional Japanese poetry as follows:

The loss of the longer forms deprived the poets of the possibility of composing, say, narrative or intellectual poetry that requires more space than 31 syllables, but this did not bother them.

(Donald Keene: *The Colors of Poetry*, p. 12)

The short form of *tanka* seems to have influenced the contemporary poetry of Japan, and it might be said that there is a tendency to shortness in the poems of Japan compared with Western ones. Some of Durrell's lyrical poems have as short forms as those of Japanese poems.

On this subject, the poetry of Japan and of Durrell are consistent with each other. I consider that it is more important to explore the potential of a shorter form and to communicate the emotions that spring from seeds in the human heart, than to expand the poetic horizon using longer forms.

By searching for the common features of Durrell's poems and Japanese poetry, I think we Japanese can understand our love for Durrell's. However devoted to solitude a poet may be, if he forsakes totally the companionship of other living creatures, he will be depriving himself of one of the joys of creation, the recognition of his equals. We Japanese are happy to find the joys of poetry in reading and enjoying both Durrell's poems and Japanese ones, and to find some characteristics common in human heart.

TEXT: Lawrence Durrell, *Collected Poems 1931-1974*, London, Faber, 1985.

Passages of English translation from Japanese poems are mine.